

VZCZCXRO2128
PP RUEHPB
DE RUEHSV #0465/01 2662019
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 232019Z SEP 07
FM AMEMBASSY SUVA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0081
INFO RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1810
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 0005
RUEHKL/AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR 0055
RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY 1378
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0023
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO 0001
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 0092
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 1578
RUEHNZ/AMCONSUL AUCKLAND 0530
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY 0938
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA 0017
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHHJJAA/JICPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000465

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/24/2017
TAGS: PREL PGOV MARR PHUM FJ
SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE 9/24/2007

REF: SUVA 436

SUVA 00000465 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

¶1. (U) Fiji interim Prime Minister Bainimarama intends bilats with Venezuela, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Italy during his UNGA stay. The Fiji military has warned against any efforts to depose Bainimarama during his trip. Bainimarama has signaled he will re-shuffle the interim cabinet soon. Two investigations of military personnel for murders early this year remain pending. An IG review of the Great Council of Chiefs and a proposed People's Charter for reform are percolating. The re-imposition of public-emergency regulations early this month remains controversial, and day-to-day human rights issues continue to arise. The inquiry into alleged misconduct by Chief Justice Fatiaki is to begin soon. Fiji has announced it will open a diplomatic post in Seoul as part of a "Look North" policy.
End summary.

Bainimarama meetings at UNGA: Venezuela; Cuba, DR; Italy

¶2. (C) The office of interim PM Bainimarama has told the media that, aside from a speech to the General Assembly on Sept. 28, Bainimarama will hold bilats with Venezuela, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Italy. The Venezuela and Cuba events follow meetings interim Minister Bune had around the edges of the PICL in Washington in May. Venezuela reportedly will discuss energy assistance, perhaps a proposal for petroleum refining in Fiji. Bainimarama said the topic would be "biofuels." Bainimarama said Cuba has offered aid. He suggested assistance to the Fiji boxing team would be helpful. We presume the Italy meeting is to push for a visa to visit MFO Sinai HQ in Rome. Reportedly Italy has refused the visa thus far. We are curious about business with the Dominican Republic. There has been no mention to the media of the scheduled Bainimarama meeting with EAP PDAS Davies.

Fiji military warns against counter-coup efforts

¶3. (C) The Fiji military spokesman, LtCol Tikoitoga, told the media Sept. 24 that military allegiance to Bainimarama is

solid, and he warned against any attempt to depose the Commander while he is away for the UNGA. The trip which begins Oct. 25 will be Bainimarama's first departure from Fiji since last December's coup. Tikoitoga said some people made efforts in the past to remove Bainimarama while he was overseas. As an example, Tikoitoga referred to last November when, he said, three diplomats in Suva allegedly asked Deputy Commander Teleni to withdraw his support from Commodore Bainimarama. Comment: As previously reported, that depiction, described as the Australian, UK, and U.S. COMs encouraging mutiny, was not accurate. End comment.

Interim Cabinet to be reshuffled?

¶4. (C) Commodore Bainimarama told the media last week that "a couple of reshuffles" in Cabinet are expected "in the next couple of months." A source close to Bainimarama has told us three interim ministers have particularly irritated the Commodore and the military council: interim Finance Minister Chaudhry; interim Attorney General Sayed-Khaiyum; and interim Labor/Tourism Minister Rounds-Ganilau. Comment: Removing Chaudhry would be a major political event, perhaps too major to actually happen. End comment.

Murder investigations...never ending

¶5. (C) Investigations into the alleged murder of two ethnic-Fijian males by military forces early this year still continue, despite pleas from the victims' families for justice. The cases do not appear complex, and reportedly the perpetrators were identified within days if not hours of the acts; however, the military, the police, and the public prosecutor's office have juggled the cases endlessly. Interim Police Commissioner Teleni has now directed a Police team to "look into" and "speed up" the investigations. Commodore Bainimarama told the media last week he "will not

SUVA 00000465 002.2 OF 003

interfere" in the investigations. He said he has "all the confidence in the military and police."

GCC and People's Charter processes moving ahead

¶6. (C) The IG's review of the Great Council of Chiefs and an IG proposal of a People's Charter are proceeding, though both are reportedly receiving mixed responses. A number of provincial councils of chiefs have reportedly endorsed the GCC review, but some others, including Tailevu and Naitasiri, have been negative. The opportunity for public comment on the People's Charter proposal has been extended repeatedly, reportedly because relatively few submissions have arrived, with a number of them negative. The IG has announced, though, that sufficient responses are now in and the interim Cabinet will consider the People's Charter proposal shortly. Commodore Bainimarama told the media last Friday that he wants the support of the chiefs but he is moving on regardless. He described the Charter as the military's "exit strategy" to return the reins of government back to politicians. Comment: the People's Charter concept paper lists a number of noble goals (though it omits an end to coup culture). Unfortunately, the make-up of the Charter commission would mostly be people selected by the IG, with Bainimarama a co-chair. Many observers fear the process would not be free and independent, and they question how an un-elected body could chart the political future for all the people of Fiji. End comment.

Public Emergency Regulation reactions, review?

¶7. (SBU) The re-imposition of public-emergency regulations (PER) on Sept. 6, in response to deposed PM Qarase's return to Suva, brought complaints from several quarters, including from human-rights activists Shameema Ali and Angie Heffernan. That irritated Commodore Bainimarama, who informed the media Sept. 14 that the two should "shut their mouths up." He said the two don't know what is happening in terms of the

security situation and he accused them of mouthing the sentiments of Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S., who, he said, pay their bills. Ali and Heffernan responded that they have every right to speak up under the Fiji Constitution and they do so independently. There are rumors that the PER may be removed soon; however, Bainimarama told the media last week not to expect the PER to end anytime soon.

Human rights notes

¶8. (SBU) The military took one of Fiji's highest chiefs into custody on the night of Sept. 8, allegedly for having gotten into an altercation with a military officer at a bar. Reportedly the officer was Bainimarama's son. The police, who ordinarily would handle such a case, played only a subsidiary role. On Sept. 5, in response to an allegation by Qarase that he had received a military death threat, a military spokesman warned Qarase and his SDL party not to "discredit" the military to create instability. Bainimarama threatened to send Qarase back to exile if he continued to speak out. In subsequent days, after re-invocation of the emergency regulations, Qarase has been very quiet. On the night of Sept. 5, vandals smashed the windshields of automobiles belonging to the Fiji Daily Post's general manager and his daughter. The GM is a relative and close associate of Qarase. The Permanent Secretary of the Fiji Public Services Commission announced that a senior officer in the Finance Ministry has been suspended for allegedly blogging against the IG on government time. She said this is the second such case. The PermSec reminded public servants that they must be apolitical.

More problems in the judiciary

¶9. (C) Six expatriate judges of the Fiji Court of Appeals resigned this month, announcing that actions by Acting Chief Justice Gates had made it clear they were no longer wanted. The Law Council of Australia's president said government interference in the legal system of Fiji is undermining the rule of law. Also early this month, President Iloilo's office announced appointment of two new Court of Appeals judges, both from Malaysia: Dato' Dr. Cyrus Das and Dato'

SUVA 00000465 003.2 OF 003

Cecil Abraham. Neither has been a judge previously, and we hear from our Australian colleagues that at least one of them hasn't actually accepted the appointment. Last week, interim AG Sayed-Khaiyum announced that the inquiry into alleged misconduct by Chief Justice Fatiaki will commence shortly. Judges have been picked, though Sayed-Khaiyum refused to name them publicly. Sayed-Khaiyum also announced that former judge John Connor will undertake an investigation of the Fiji magistrate system. Comment: with investigations at the top (CJ) and bottom (magistrates), only the High Court is untouched. Unfortunately, it is the High Court that by many accounts most needs a clean-up. End comment.

Fiji to open diplomatic mission in ROK

¶10. (C) The IG has announced it will establish a resident diplomatic mission in Seoul. Interim Foreign Minister Nailatikau noted that Korea "has not interfered in Fiji's political affairs," and relations "have been consistently cordial." Nailatikau said another fundamental reason for strengthening ties is the IG's "Look North" policy, to counter problems with Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S. The new ROK Ambassador to Fiji presented his credentials to President Iloilo last week. Ambassador Zeon told us Iloilo seemed mentally alert and carried on a useful conversation. Asked if he would be meeting with Bainimarama, Zeon said, "no," he had no intention to do so. Zeon said that, while the ROK has allowed senior members of the IG to transit Seoul, approval has been for transit only, no official visits as yet.

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